

## Column - dogs (2024)

Insights about the Christian life come from a variety of sources. Even the family pet can be our teacher.

The late Rev. Bruce E. Whitehead was fond of telling the story of a Labrador retriever he and his wife had back in the early '70s. When a panel of screen on the porch where this dog spent most of his time was removed for repair, the dog refused to go out.

Two insights – one negative, the other positive -- can be drawn from this dog's behaviour. The first concerns Christian freedom. "For freedom Christ has set us free; stand fast therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery," writes Paul in Galatians 5:1 (RSV).

The negative insight we might learn from this dog is that Christians don't always take advantage of the freedom that is theirs in Christ. Rather, like the Labrador, they refused to exercise this freedom and prefer to stay in bondage.

A case in point concerns a young Nigerian seminary president I met some years ago in Oxford. Noah, as his name was, grew up in a Muslim family where pork was off limits. Even after becoming a Christian, he did not rush down to the nearest market and buy a pound of bacon or stop at the local barbeque stand for a pulled-pork sandwich.

The door had been opened, but Noah had refused to go free, that is, until a group of us from our college took him to a country pub one evening. There, he cautiously put a forkful of roasted pork to his lips, and liked it!

Of course, whether one chooses to eat or not to eat a particular food is a thing indifferent. It is not a Gospel matter. Yet, for Noah that act symbolized casting off a bondage from the past and experiencing freedom in Christ.

But, there is second insight we might learn from the Labrador retriever's refusal to leave the porch. This one is positive.

Instead of viewing the dog's behaviour as a failure to exercise freedom, we might view it as an act of obedience. The dog was faithfully following the rules of the household of which he was a part. He was so well schooled that it never occurred to him to act any other way.

The parallel is that the longer we live in the Christian family, the less often we need to get out a book of rules to find out what we should do in this or that situation. The boundaries – the “narrow way” of Christ -- are set in our heart and become second nature.

Life lessons are all around us, if we have eyes to see and ears to hear. Would that all Christians were as obedient and well trained as this Labrador.

*O GOD, the strength of all those who put their trust in thee; Mercifully accept our prayers; and because, through the weakness of our mortal nature, we can do no good thing without thee, grant us the help of thy grace, that in keeping thy commandments we may please thee, both in will and deed; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.  
(Collect for the First Sunday after Trinity )Book of Common Prayer)*

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